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AUTHOR Dubble, Sharon L.
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ABSTRACT

When planning the growth of Montessori schools, planners should add the concept of evolution to those of organization and management in order to embrace Maria Montessori's notion that the purpose of education is to fully develop human potentialities. The evolution of Montessori schools must be understood and encouraged through the process of nurturing the evolution of people. Teachers undergo stages of development, starting in the formal training phase and continuing within the context of the school. In this model, teachers move from formal training to a first-year neonate stage, a consolidation stage in years two through four, and renewal during five to seven years, finally emerging as seasoned teachers. This model re-envisions teachers in Montessori schools as part of an organic evolutionary process. This process can be applied to other parts of the school, including parents, board members and administrators. (JPB)

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Sharon L. Dubble

EVOLVING PEOPLE/EVOLVING SCHOOLS

Sharon L. Dubble, Ph.D.

*This address was given at the North American Montessori Teacher's Association Conference **"Growing Schools for Human Growth"** held in Phoenix, Arizona January 22-24, 1998.*

During the past two decades, there has been phenomenal growth in the number and size of Montessori Schools in this country. Dr. Montessori, herself, did not really speak of "schools", let alone concepts of school development and management. Her focus was upon the child and the dynamics of human development.

Over the last decades, we have created alliances and organizations to help us address the realities of growing schools. Yet there has been an underlying question as to whether the Montessori philosophy requires us to search beyond traditional models of school organization and management.

We gather at this conference to focus on the large challenge of "growing schools for human growth." If we truly embrace Montessori's radical notion that the purpose of education is to fully develop human potentialities, then I think we need to add the concept of **evolution** to those of organization and management in thinking about growing our schools. I am proposing that we need to understand and encourage an evolution of our schools through the process of nurturing the evolution of people.

Dynamics of Evolution

The process of evolution occurs through a complex of reciprocal relationships. This understanding is at the heart of Dr. Montessori's concept of Cosmic Education. There are two key dynamics in evolution; we can say that evolution occurs on a kind of **dynamic continuum**:

creation.....and.....maintenance

change.....and.....stability

new manifestation.....and.....structural support

As the world and society become more complex, the web of interrelationships mirrors that complexity. Change in one small element can result in reverberating and often unanticipated changes in other areas. The relationship is no longer simply a linear, predictable cause and effect. The challenge for us as Montessori Schools is to integrate the increasing complexities in ways which create and maintain a flow toward wholeness. How do we evolve along that dynamic continuum so that complexity and diversity do not result in fracturing and diffusion, but rather move us toward greater coherence?

School as Organism

I suggest that the key to this challenge is in re-conceptualizing the Montessori School as an **organism** rather than an organization. The following scheme outlines the major dichotomies of those two concepts or "ways of seeing":

PS 026507

organization	organism
human-made institution	living, evolving entity
constructed according to a plan - changes structured from without	develops according to dynamic interaction of internal directives with the external environment
managed; controlled hierarchical structure	manifests structures which allow for maximum responsiveness

If we begin to think and see organically, we realize that there can be no blueprint for the Montessori School. Every school manifests itself uniquely; each develops its own story. But I believe there are some common guidelines for evolving schools organically. We find those guidelines for schools by focusing on the central principles which underlie **human** development. In other words, we evolve living, dynamic schools through evolving people.

Montessori's life work was to define and to articulate the central principles which characterize, which are essential to, the full development of human potential. When we, as school communities, concentrate our focus on those core principles, those natural laws, which characterize the process of full human development, we then evolve practices which lead us toward more fully integrated, whole, **living** schools.

In other contexts, I have discussed what I understand as these central principles in Montessori's writing, the essential elements in the process of full human development. More recently, I have distilled my focus to three key principles. First, development occurs in stages, each with particular characteristics and sensitivities. Second, development is interactive, occurring through action with and within an environment. Third, development is integrated, responding to an inner directive which moves toward cohesion.

Any one of these principles could be the focus of an entire presentation - an entire conference. But today I want to examine the first principle, that **development occurs in stages**, and give some examples of just one correlated aspect of this idea of developmental stages as observed among teachers in our schools.

What Do We Mean by Stages of Development?

Montessorians are always talking about stages of development. What do we really understand this to mean? First, development is not a steady, incremental process. Rather, particular capacities and sensitivities at certain stages allow for a different kind and quality of growth. The actual nature of learning differs at various stages.

Secondly, the development at each subsequent stage rests upon the quality of the development of the previous stage. This is why we don't focus on the end product; Montessorians are not "out-come based" educators. Instead, we focus on the actual experience of the current stage, seeking to maximize development of potential "now." This is different than preparing for the future. We are involved in "maximizing the present", knowing that the way we live and develop at this present stage ultimately shapes the future.

Now we are very familiar with this concept of stages of development as applied to children. And, for Montessorians, this principle is central in shaping our pedagogical practice. I am suggesting that, as we understand our schools to be evolving, organic entities, this same principle of stages of development is apparent with teachers, parents, board members, and perhaps even with Montessori schools themselves.

The stages may not be as discreet or clearly defined as for the young child (indeed, the blurring of clear distinctions is usually part of increased complexity, whether in one individual organism or in a social system). But by observing and discerning stages of development in the various elements of the school community, we can begin to see common sensitivities, opportunities, and potential pitfalls which characterize certain stages. And just as awareness of stages of development is a key in shaping our pedagogical practice, so this same awareness, applied to other levels of our schools, allows us to evolve organizational practices which are organic and lead toward fuller development of our potential as people and as schools.

Stages of Development in Teachers

There is a classic question: "Are teachers born or are they made?" I think this question is missing the mark. **Teachers develop**. Each is unique, with his or her individual personality and potentialities. But are there some common stages of development for Montessori teachers? Furthermore, can awareness of these stages help us to integrate the developing teacher more fully into the development of the school?

Dr. Montessori talked about the development of the teacher.

> The real preparation for education is the study of one's self. The training of the teacher who is to help life is something far more than the learning of ideas. It includes the training of character; it is a preparation of the spirit. (Montessori 1967, 131)

This developmental work begins in the formal training phase. But it is an on-going development which must be continued within the context of the school. What are the stages in this development - this training of character - this preparation of the spirit?

Stage I: Formal Training

The formal Montessori teacher training is not primarily a matter of learning technical skills. Rather, it seeks a major shift in perspective. The student must invest deeply in this endeavor. There can be no quick and easy training using a "how-to" guide to apply a veneer of knowledge about materials and technique.

This first stage sets the foundation for all further development. It is a period of major psychological change, requiring a new view of self in relation to the child. There is frequently a personal transformation akin to "Aha! I see the light!" As a result, the teacher in training is capable of enormous focus and effort.

But the task before today's teacher is more and more complex. While there is need during this first stage to provide "protection" for psychic development, there is also a danger in isolating the trainee from the complexity of today's demands. In Montessori's concept of "Cosmic Education", she holds that we assist the individual's own development

by giving an impression of the larger patterns of the universe and human society. Are we giving these teachers in training an overview of today's educational context?

No longer will most Montessori teachers find themselves in isolated one classroom schools. What is the cultural context of today's schools? How do schools work? How do faculties work? What are the protocols of the private and the public system?

What about the societal realities reflected in our schools? What are the demands of full day programs? How does the classroom respond to rapidly expanding technology? What expectations do today's parents have for their child's school?

What are the current educational developments and trends? What information about education is highlighted by the media? What questions will the parents be asking? What are the current controversies? How does contemporary research support the development of Montessori education?

I am not suggesting a change in the fundamental approach to training Montessori teachers. But if we seek to maximize the development at this first stage, we need to give an overview of the larger context so that teachers can begin to envision how that essential relationship between themselves and the child fits into the larger framework of evolving schools and an evolving society.

Stage II: Neonate (first year)

This stage is very much like that of the human neonate, that first fragile period when the newborn is adjusting to life in a new environment outside the womb. In this case, the teacher is adjusting to the environment outside the womb of the training center.

The ultimate task of the neonate stage is survival. For the infant, it means being able to breathe, digest, and accommodate one's basic systemic functions to an independent existence in a new environment which in infinitely larger and more complex. For the teacher, it means **making the ideal real.** The new teacher must "habituate" within the new environment of the school. Based upon the internalized philosophy and values of the formal training stage, (s)he begins to develop independent, autonomous patterns or habits of practice in response to the reality of the classroom and school.

This neonate stage is characterized by idealism. If there was deep investment in the first training stage, this teacher is embued with the vision of the child's potential and convinced of the truth of those principles of development discovered in training. She is now drawn toward application, wants to do it herself, and believes that it will work.

This stage is also a period of great vulnerability. In her own classroom, the teacher feels cut-off from a "support system" and often feels overwhelmed by the responsibility undertaken. As a new faculty member she is sensitive to criticism, fearing rejection or failure. To encourage full development at this stage, the school environment needs to find a good balance between nurturing the neonate teacher's drive to make her own adaptation and protecting her from stresses that may result in "failure to thrive."

This teacher needs freedom to "do it by the book", to experiment through trial and error and repetition. She is not helped by the quick fix or the prepared solution. She needs to be allowed to isolate difficulties and to focus on one thing at a time. Her most important task is to develop an intimate link with the children in her class. Consequently, she needs

protection from stresses which would interfere with this key task; stresses such as overly-demanding parents or major faculty responsibilities.

Most importantly, the neonate needs to establish a new support structure. The greater complexity of today's schools requires the teacher to integrate many aspects of the school culture at once. It is wise to think of orientation to this new culture as ongoing during this entire year (not something easily handled through a one-time session or a faculty handbook). This is best accomplished through a few key personal relationships. These relationships (with an administrator, faculty member, experienced board member) center around on-going dialogue which focuses on the core values which are at the heart of the school's philosophy and mission. This serves to gradually support and connect the neonate teacher within the new school environment.

At this stage, the developing teacher is also helped through occasional re-connection with those who were vital supports during the first stage. Neonate teachers appreciate discussions with colleagues who are experiencing similar changes and challenges. They are also eager for seminars or dialogue with the faculty who were part of their original teacher training. The technological advances of e-mail and distance conferencing can be used to facilitate this kind of re-connection which is so valuable during this second stage.

Stage III: Consolidation (2-4 years)

During this third stage, the teacher begins to integrate the various skills related to working in the classroom. He is no longer "tied" to his teaching albums or manuals. Rather, he has internalized the details of presentations and has developed his own extensions of materials. He can individualize his lessons while maintaining awareness of the whole class community and is able to communicate effectively with parents.

During the previous stage, the teacher differentiated the various tasks and skills and isolated difficulties of implementation. Now, in the consolidation stage, he is weaving the various elements into a fluid whole. The result is an integration of practice which is manifested as a natural flow in the classroom.

What common characteristics do we see in teachers during the consolidation stage? These teachers tend to be very focused on their individual classes. They are self-directed and exhibit high levels of motivation. Consolidating teachers express joy in their daily work and a growing self-confidence. They appear sturdy, competent, "together."

Just as a teacher has to be aware of not neglecting the dutiful, motivated child in the class, so the school must guard against the tendency to ignore the teacher in this consolidation stage. Though dutiful and highly motivated, this teacher needs both specific feedback and continuing reflection. In order to accomplish this, the school structure should allow the teacher to complete a three year cycle with the same community of children and begin a new cycle. Without such continuity, the opportunity for consolidation based upon feedback and reflection is seriously diminished.

The teacher at this stage is ready for more directed input. He needs new focus areas related to the classroom. Often these areas of focus involve specific problems of individual behavior or group dynamics. However, it is equally important to examine and develop those aspects which seem to be particularly positive. The discussions in those key support relationships now become directed toward expectations and goals: "What should I expect of myself, the children, the parents?" There is less vulnerability at this stage and a readiness for the give and take of collegial dialogue.

During this consolidation stage, the teacher's need for feedback and reflection is enhanced by opportunities to look at his work from a vantage point which is outside his own classroom walls. Perspective is broadened by observing other classrooms, particularly those of the same age level. Continuing education related to his specific curriculum (workshops, seminars, refresher courses) is very helpful in helping him to focus a sharper and broader lens upon his own practice.

Stage IV: Renewal (5-7 years)

Stage four is a very critical period in the development of the teacher. We need to recognize it as a major transition point - for it is during this period that we often "lose" good teachers in one of two ways: they either burn out and leave the classroom or they burn out and stay in the classroom in a condition of stasis. Just when, as administrators, we think we can relax - that this teacher has really made it - we need to recognize another stage of development in the ongoing preparation of the spirit.

The danger at this transition point is that the consolidation of the previous stage can become mere routine. The integration and fluidity of practice can solidify into a mode of "automatic pilot." This teacher is tired of what she sees as doing the same things. She needs to define herself as a professional in a broader sense; to see the larger context of her work.

As in the second stage, this renewal stage is also a period of increased vulnerability. But the vulnerability manifests itself in very different characteristics than seen in the earlier neonate teacher. The teachers at this stage often exhibit defensiveness. They become more aggressive, intransigent, and argumentative. They are frequently viewed as prickly and "difficult."

The challenge is to make use of these characteristics in order to engage the questions which will move toward a state of renewal and a rededication to their work with a deeper understanding. The ultimate questions being asked are, "Where is this going? What are the possibilities? What is my potential? What are the potential developments for me in this field?"

In order to support development at this stage, we can provide these teachers with exposure and challenge. They need exposure to a wider variety of experiences with community professionals: membership in educational networks, on-going study groups, participation in field study, advanced study in a specific area. They need to expand their observations across the continuum of age levels to see how their own work fits into the larger patterns of the development of child.

Teachers in the renewal stage need the challenge of greater leadership in the school community. These teachers benefit from the experience of giving presentations to the Board of Directors, leading faculty meetings, chairing committees, facilitating parent discussion groups. They can be encouraged to actively participate in conferences with additional responsibilities to write-up proceedings or make summary presentations of proceedings.

During the renewal stage, the school and the teacher need to **re- invest** in further training and education. There must be a clear desire to support the on-going development of this chosen "career path." The teacher wants to be actively engaged is a discussion of

options and opportunities along this path in order to believe that personal and professional advancement is not synonymous with leaving the classroom.

Stage V: The Seasoned Teacher

Having gone through the important stage of renewal, the teacher is now re-dedicated to the work at a deeper level. It is almost like a renewal of vows. The teacher at this stage is "seasoned", having weathered numerous changes (including storms and droughts). The teacher has re-examined core principles and broadened exposure to their applications. New growth can now be sustained because there are stronger and deeper roots and wider, expansive branches.

This stage is characterized by a submerging of personal striving; the teacher is no longer struggling to prove himself. There is less need for extrinsic feedback as motivation has become deeply internalized. This teacher also demonstrates greater outreach, going beyond his own class or school . The seasoned teacher asks the deeper questions in every scenario. He initiates and directs conversations and studies around key principles and values. He is concerned with the wider development of the work in service of the child.

The seasoned stage does not mean a static state of arrival. As in every stage, development for the seasoned teacher must be supported. These teachers need enhanced opportunities for leadership in wider arenas. They design presentations for conferences and lead curriculum development efforts. They become involved in long-range planning and take leadership positions on local and national committees. Schools need to consider release time and occasional sabbaticals for these seasoned teachers in order to allow for deeper study, project development and research.

Summary

What I have just briefly described is an application of the principle of developmental stages to the development of Montessori teachers. I offer it not as a definitive model, but rather as an example of a way of seeing - **re-envisioning** - teachers in our schools as part of an organic evolutionary process. This same kind of observation of stages can, I believe, be applied to parents, to board members, to administrators.....and ultimately to schools themselves. To the degree to which we recognize and respond to the needs and sensitivities of people at various stages, we will continue to develop schools which are characterized by momentum and vitality of spirit.

In her writings and lectures, Dr. Montessori emphasized that the development of the individual shapes the development of human society; that the personal affects the larger whole of human culture. If we believe that, then we must seek to evolve our schools, which are a manifestation of human culture, not primarily through administrative directives or adherence to some master formula, but rather through the fullest development of individual people.

As our schools embrace increased diversity and complexity both within and without, the interaction of all parts - all people - creates **reciprocal reverberations** throughout the community. We experience a vibrancy as we become a learning community - a growing, learning, living entity.

The school is more than any one person's story. The key to our schools' positive growth lies in developing and integrating the individual stories within a larger cultural

framework focused around core principles and values. Our challenge is to integrate the different voices and perspectives into a larger story - a cohesive vision; to respect and honor all the various stages and transitions without losing the thread of the story. Our school practices and rituals will then flow from the integration of individual personal purpose in a larger evolutionary purpose. And our schools' stories will develop a deeper richness and resonance which reverberates into the next generation.

References

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